

Leave off speaking of what you do not know²⁵ and with which you have not been charged.²⁶ Refrain from treading a path if you fear losing your way on it, for halting before you are helplessly lost is better than plunging into [a path filled with] terror.²⁷

²⁵ People who speak without any knowledge upon which to base what they say most likely have one of the following problems: 1) They feel insecure with their ignorance and so they try to cover it up by speaking emphatically about nothing at all. 2) They long to make it seem they are wise by speaking as wise people do. 3) They wish to exercise authority over others, so they dole out senseless advice. The danger of speaking without knowledge is notable. If one speaks about religious matters without knowledge, one is liable to attribute falsehood to God. About such a person the Qur'an says, "Who is more unjust than he who lies about God?" (6:21). If one speaks about mundane matters without knowledge, one may lead others to great harm by offering them harmful advice. Or barring this, when one speaks one implies that one knows what one is talking about. If, in reality, one does not, then to speak is to lie. The best thing for such a person to do is to spend his time learning and asking questions, not expressing his baseless opinions and offering senseless advice.

²⁶ Time and energy are limited resources that must be used frugally. Speaking when it is not one's duty to speak is wasteful, even if one has the requisite knowledge to warrant speaking. For example, in mundane life, there is no need for a person to speak about matters to which he has no relation and about which he can do nothing. Similarly, in religious matters, there is no use teaching someone who does not care to learn. Worse yet is asking questions that are irrelevant to us, for we not only waste our own time but the time of the person from whom we seek our answer. Thus, as a general rule, he is advising us to refrain from speaking unless there is benefit in it. In one incident, Imām 'Alī passes a man speaking excessively, so he tells him, "You are dictating to your two angels a letter to your Lord, so speak of things that concern you and leave off speaking of what does not concern you" (*Amālī al-Ṣadūq*, the 9th session, tradition 4). In another tradition he says, "Do not say what you do not know. In fact, do not say *all* that you know. For God has prescribed certain obligations on your limbs by which he will argue against you on the Day of Resurrection (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 382).

²⁷ This sentence speaks of a general principle applicable to all walks of life—although in the context, it applies specifically to the issue of speaking without knowledge. We are not obliged to try everything. If there is any reason to suspect that an activity or experience may confuse us or tempt us to do something wrong, there is no reason to pursue it. In fact, it is better to avoid it altogether so as not to risk the danger to our soul. That is not to say that we should not be daring when it comes to uncertain experiences where there is no threat of "plunging into [a path filled with] terror." To this end Imām 'Alī has said, "If you are apprehensive of a thing, then throw yourself into it, for the severity of your fear is greater than that which you fear" (*Nahj al-balāghah* saying 175).